

I teach 9th grade English, and because I know that Socratic Seminars are a method frequently used in the 10th and 11th grade classes, I began looking into resources on Socratic Circles as one method to engage students in my classroom in active discourse. One of the most helpful texts I read, *Socratic Circles, Fostering Critical and Creative Thinking in Middle and High School* by Matt Copeland, offered me an abundance of helpful information. My new learning began with an informative chart on the characteristics of dialogue. The most important information I gathered from this chart was that “in dialogue, everyone is a part of the solution to the problem...dialogue affirms the idea of people learning from each other,” and “in dialogue, one submits one’s best thinking, knowing that other people’s reflections will help improve it rather than destroy it.” Dialogue, or discourse, as it turns out, is exactly what my class needed. I want my students to be engaged and to take responsibility for their own learning. I want them to be thoughtful and pose questions, to try and find answers instead of having them spoon-fed. But in order for them to improve their questioning and take more control over their own learning, I needed to teach them how to question, and how to have discussions and discourse that lead them to answers they seek.

Knowing that I needed to help my students start engaging in discourse was a start, but I needed additional information in order to come up with an effective plan that would make a positive impact. If I wanted students to engage in discourse about the literature or area of study, I needed them to take an interest in it. I met with one of the school’s Instructional Coaches who supplied me with resources and materials regarding this topic. A specific handout she gave me was filled with teaching and learning strategies and activities. I selected two questions from this sheet to propel my planning forward: What questions should I ask to draw them in and actively involve them in the learning? and What questions shall I invite them to take on responsibility for the inquiry? The first question forced me to find ways to engage them at the beginning of every class. How do you engage a room full of 14 year olds? For starters, with high-interest questions. Who can tell me about something interesting they did over the weekend? Who saw the new blockbuster movie? Who played sports yesterday? After each question, the students were asked to elaborate. This was a quick way for them to engage and take ownership of the topic. From there, the questions moved on to more debatable, moral or hypothetical questions that could connect to our text, such as, “I read an article about a woman whose arranged marriage to a man fell through because he could not solve a simple math problem. What is your opinion on that?” These questions led to broader topics, so students could turn and talk about their views on arranged marriage, with each student reporting back to class on the conversation. I quickly learned that drawing students in with brief, personal questions and deliberately shifting the conversation was very effective. It impacted my practice greatly, as I now choose to start my classes in this fashion, rather than begin them with a worksheet or a prompt. The students have also been impacted as they can more easily make the transition into the primary subject matter of the day, and I noted that in one class, students, only 3 or 4 students generally participated early in class, I now have between 14-15 students who raise their hands to participate daily. That is a jump from 17% to 82% participation!

The second question on the handout impacted my practice greatly, because it essentially forced me to plan how I would release the responsibility for discourse to my students. Up until this point, students were conditioned for me to lead conversations and to, ultimately, provide them with the “correct” answers. I had learned from Copeland’s book that “working in small groups of 3 or 4 allows them to grow more comfortable sharing their opinions with peers and working together to make value judgments.” Therefore, I decided to plan for small group work with a focus on questioning. Because high level questioning leads

to quality discussion, I first asked my students to complete a question chart. The question chart is actually a grid of 36 blank questions, made up of the starters who, what, where, why, when and how. Earlier in the year students had been provided a copy of Bloom's Taxonomy Question Stems, and knew the difference between a Level 1 question and a Level 6 question. Students were introduced to Webb's DOK levels, as well. Their purpose now was to create DOK level 2 and 3 questions to be used for discussion in class. I immediately saw an impact on my class. As they crafted their own questions they became immersed in discourse immediately, determining which of their questions would be worthy of discussion, crafting questions that could not be answered in one word, deciding on topics that would generate opinions and going back to the text to help create questions whose answers could be proven with textual references. My students were able to craft some excellent discussion questions, and engaged in very purposeful and meaningful discourse during the process of planning out the questions, as well. My practice now includes many opportunities for students to engage in meaningful discussions with classmates and opportunities for the class, as a whole, to work together to answer questions. This ties in directly with my indicator, as my students participate in purposeful discourse on a regular basis.

As my new learning had impacted both my practice and my students positively, I decided to move forward and give the students even greater opportunities for responsibility in their own learning by working with Literature Circles. After carefully selecting eight novels of varying text complexity, style and subject matter, I offered students the opportunity to explore each book through summaries and hands on interaction with each. Students then chose which novel they wished to read, and I grouped them accordingly into groups of no more than 5 students apiece. Out of 103 students, 100 of them chose novels that were challenging, yet appropriate for their reading level and required no assistance in selecting a book. Because of the earlier impact on my teaching, I now knew that it was appropriate for my role to become that of a facilitator during literary discussions with my students, so I created opportunities for each member of the group to take an active role in the discourse. Each role held a responsibility to facilitate discussion of a literary element, such as theme, characterization, diction, plot propulsion, and connection to the essential question. We had already covered these elements in class, and students are able to find evidence to support ideas, so I knew that, as Copeland stated, my students had "incorporat[ed] these elements into other classroom activities before engaging in dialogue" and therefore would be "more active and responsible for guiding their own learning."

The student response has shown that the impact due to this shift in responsibility has been great. One of the common issues that the 9th grade English PLC teachers face is that whole-class assigned novels are often left unread. The result of the lack of interest in the novel is that class discussions are generally brief, as they turn into teacher-led lectures. The opposite has happened with student selected novels. While they are still reading literature approved and purchased by the district, their ownership of their choices have given them the impetus to read that a mere assignment could not. Students are engaging with the literature and the discourse, having been given a purpose by their roles, is much deeper and more meaningful.

In summation, I first learned that I needed to more purposefully plan out my higher order thinking questions. Because of this I learned the characteristics of dialogue vs. debate and that not only is dialogue a means for students to learn from one another, but it is also a great way for students to share their best thinking with one another. I learned what questions to ask of myself in order to prepare my lessons

better, and that asking the right questions at the very beginning of class can change the way the class acts and interacts for the entirety of the period. I learned that I needed to release some of my grip on the class in order for them to show me that they are capable of greater things and that if I start them in small, comfortable groups I can help foster their skills in speaking their minds. Finally I learned that my students are great thinkers, and that given the right frame of mind they can deeply relate to the literature I so want them to enjoy.

As I reflect on the impact on my practice, I see some positive changes. I plan my questions in advance - I craft careful questions designed to invite my students into a conversation, or even a debate, before they even realize they are immersed in a lesson. I now actively plan with the intent to release more control to my students. I no longer rely on traditional “do-now” activities, but incorporate conversation that leads to dialogue. My practice has been impacted the most greatly in the area of questioning - many lessons now have questioning at the core, and allow more time for students to find their own answers, which means there are fewer teacher-centered activities.

The impact on students, as usual, has been the greatest. Students are engaging more quickly in class, a greater number of students are engaging, and there is a higher level of enthusiasm for the material. Students have been impacted in that they are now held more responsible for the discussion that occurs in class, they have a greater say in the material, and they have a larger role in their education. This impact has been positive, as my data shows that student participation in class activities (written, or oral) and homework completion has gone from 62% to 86% overall. It is clear that learning to facilitate purposeful discourse in my classroom has been beneficial for all, as students clearly now engage with the literature more deeply, and are more active in and responsible for their own learning.